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EARTH TO EARTH:

A PLEA FOR A MORE RATIONAL OBSERVANCE
OF THE CONDITIONS ESSENTIAL TO THE
PROPER BURIAL OF THE DEAD.

BY

FRANCIS SEYMOUR HADEN, F.R.C.S.

“Lay her i' the earth.”

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[1875]

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PREFACE.

THE letters which are here reprinted embody
a long-contemplated effort to expose and remedy
a great social evil.

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TO THE EDITOR OF THE "TIMES."

SIR,—An agitation, attributable possibly to an imperfect appreciation of the merits of the case, has been caused by the proposal of certain German and Italian writers in their own country, and of an eminent surgeon in this, to substitute the burning of the dead for their interment.

Interment, the apostles of Cremation tell us, in substance if not in terms, and speaking of it in its most comprehensive sense, is repulsive in idea, costly and ineffectual in fact, horrible in practice, a vilification of the dead, and a danger to the living. In a variety of publications which have excited much attention, they denounce not any particular mode of interment, or any palpable abuses which they recognise as having crept into the practice to discredit it, but the practice itself. They take no notice of the fact that the dead are little more than nominally buried, and that, by the interposition between them and the earth that should resolve them, of such media as wood, lead, brick, and the like, interment as a principle is rendered all but nugatory, and as a practice deprived of its *raison d'être*. Finally they leave it to be inferred, since they give us no hint to the contrary, that the evils thus created are inherent in the principle of interment, and upon this inference, and upon no other ground, found their recommendation of Cremation.

It is the object of this letter, Sir, not so much to join issue with the Cremationists, whose position I must venture

to think untenable, as to invite attention to the important fact which underlies, and to some extent excuses, their proposals—viz., the fact that the dead are improperly buried; and, with reference to the serious and pressing evils which have resulted from our present mode of interment, to suggest a consideration of the following propositions:—

1. That the natural destination of all organised bodies that have lived, and that die on the earth's surface, is the earth.

2. That the evils which they (the Cremationists) would have us believe to be inseparable from the principle of interment are independent of that principle, and of our own creation.

3. That the source of these evils is to be found, not in the burial of the dead, but in the unreasoning sentiment which prompts us to keep them unburied as long as possible, and then to bury them in such a way that the earth can have no access to them.

4. That the burial of the body supposes its resolution by the direct agency of the earth to which we commit it, and that the earth is competent to effect that resolution, and to accomplish it innocuously.

5. That to seek to prevent the beneficent agency of the earth by inclosing the dead in hermetically-sealed, imperishable coffins, brick graves, and vaults, is in the highest degree unphilosophical, since it engages us in a vain resistance to an inevitable dispensation, and has led us to accumulate in our midst a vast store of human remains in every stage and condition of decay.

6. That the remedy for such evils is not in Cremation but in a sensible recognition of, and a timely submission to, a well-defined law of nature, and, if necessary, in legislative action to enforce the provisions of that law.

The claim that the earth has upon its dead, no less than that which the dead have upon the earth, is a proposition

one would have thought too obvious to merit discussion. To understand it we need only consider the properties with which the soil at our feet and everywhere at our disposal has been endowed ; that it is the most potent disinfectant known, and the readiest of application, and that, by a combination of forces inherent in it, which might well appear contradictory but for the wonderful purposes which they are destined to effect, it is resolvent and re-formative as well : that that which under the influence of the air was putrefaction, in the earth is resolution ; that which was offensive becomes inoffensive ; that which was mere decay a process of transformation. To question the competency of the earth, thus endowed, to effect the resolution and conversion of its dead, or to fail to perceive and profit by that competency, would pass comprehension if habit had not taught us to shut our eyes to it, and if the advocates of Cremation had not stepped in to tell us that we may improve upon it.

The main conditions of effective and of non-effective burial are shortly these. When the body dies, putrefaction sets in at once, and, for as long as it is allowed to remain exposed to the air, continues. Two methods of excluding the air from a dead body present themselves in practice : the direct and natural method of placing it in the earth, and what may be called the evasive and unnatural method of inclosing it in a solid case or coffin. By adopting the first method, inasmuch as we both exclude the air and invoke the resolvent action of the earth, we fulfil all the conditions of effective burial. By adopting the second method we fulfil only one of these conditions, and prevent the other. In the first case resolution at once takes the place of putrefaction ; in the last the condition of putrefaction is rendered permanent. In the first case if we look for that body at the end of five or six years we shall not find it, or, rather, we shall only find the inorganic part of it—the organic, resolved into

its constituent elements, having re-entered the atmosphere. In the last, if we look for it after fifty years, we shall find it as we left it—*plus* the action upon it of the air and of the fluids of the body which we have included with it in the coffin—that is to say, in a state of advanced but unprogressive putrefaction.

The following illustrations represent the two conditions described :—

On Christmas Day, 1870, I buried in a corner of my garden a favourite dog. On the first of November, 1874—the other day—I dug down upon the spot and recovered all that was recoverable of the body of my old companion. The residue lies upon a sheet of white foolscap paper on the table before me. It consists of a few scattered bones, with a little friable matter loosely attached to them which has all the physical characters of common earth, without the slightest odour or anything to indicate that it had once been animal tissue. Resolution, in fact, except as to the bones, which have lost much of their weight and the cancellous structure of which is beginning to break down, has been fully effected.

In 1868 I was permitted to visit the burial-ground of St. Andrew's, Holborn, then, with its contents, in course of removal to make way for the new Viaduct. The ground about the church had become raised 15 feet or 18 feet above its original level, and perpendicular sections had been made in it, here and there, from its surface to a depth varying from 10 feet to 30 feet or more. The face of these sections represented the interments of three centuries and a half. All the burials, except those in the plague-pit and one or two others to be presently mentioned, had been made in wooden or leaden coffins, some of which were still intact, and some broken in. Little difference as to condition could be perceived between the coffins of Charles II.'s time and those recently used, or between the coffins which

were of lead and those which were of wood. In the coffins which were intact were their contents, also intact, but putrid, unrecognisable. In those which had been broken in, nothing was to be found but a little ordinary earth, corresponding chiefly to the extraneous matters which had accompanied the interment, and, occasionally, not always, a few bones. Nothing more. The body itself had disappeared, and "earth to earth" had been accomplished. Here and there, in other parts of the ground, were graves lined with brick and filled with water, in which the coffins of those who had been buried in peculiar honour still floated, some head, some feet uppermost, as their gaseous contents determined. Here, again, a few fetters indicated the spot where some evil-doer had undergone what was intended, no doubt, to be the last sentence of degradation, but whose poor body, having had the advantage of being buried without a coffin, had disappeared—as had also, for the same reason, the tenants of the plague-pit.

These illustrations will now help us to realise the following facts :—

That the condition of these unresolved dead is precisely the condition to which all are condemned who are buried in imperishable coffins.

That this dead population—these festering tenants-in-perpetuity of the soil¹—outnumber by hundreds of thousands the living population above them, and that unless (as in the case with the Holborn burial-ground) an Act of Parliament should interpose to remove them, there they must lie, incapable of further change, a reproach to our intelligence and a source of poison to the soil, for any time to come.

That, unwarned and undeterred by the magnitude of the evils we have thus created, we are still engaged in extending

¹ See Lord Stowell's *Judgment*, p. 47.

and perpetuating those evils, and that in cemeteries so close to the town that they must soon become a part of it.

That were the dead only properly buried not one of these evils would have any existence—not a single dead body would remain to infect the soil—and a quantity of land of incalculable value, now hopelessly alienated, would be liberated for purposes of hygiene or of utility.

And what, after all, it is now time to ask, is the nature of the advantage that we are content to purchase at this heavy cost, and to obtain which we do not hesitate to deprive the dead of their sole prerogative? The body that should have been laid in the ground three days ago still lies up stairs, a sheet drawn over the face to protect it from the flies, and the windows slightly opened to relieve the upper part of the house of the sickening *aura* that has already begun to pervade it. No one that could help it has gone into the room these three days, and they that have had to pass the door have passed it hurriedly and furtively. Then, when from its condition the body can no longer be allowed to remain exposed, and when, in reason, its interment should be effected, comes instead the stereotyped announcement that the “closure of the coffin can be no longer delayed,” and then three, or even four, more miserable, fretful, useless days follow. You cannot go out—it would not be decent; you cannot sleep because you cannot go out; your waking hours are passed in a forced and irritating inactivity, your nights in painful endeavours to realise the cherished lineaments which, by an evasion of Nature’s plan, you are still able to keep within a few feet of you—not, indeed, as you saw them when summoned to look upon them for the last time before they were “screwed down,” but as they were a week before—beautiful with the peculiar beauty that distinguishes the recently dead, and the impression of which you would have been only too glad to be able to retain. Surely, Sir, it is time that, by a

mere effort of our common sense and moral courage, we put an end to so irrational a practice, and opened our eyes to the fact that we cannot thus outrage a Divine ordinance with impunity ; that whenever it may please us to bury our dead properly—and nothing is easier—Earth will be found competent to do her own work, and Nature to carry out her own laws ; and that a recourse to Cremation, or to any other proceeding involving a departure from those laws, will turn out to be quite unnecessary.

How, then, are we to bury our dead ? Clearly within a reasonable time of their dissolution, and in coffins of such a construction as will not prevent their resolution.¹ Let us emulate, too, the healthy sentiment of those older Jews, who considered it an indignity and an injury to be refused prompt burial and so made an offence to the living, and bury it while it is still grateful to every sense, and while,—if we feel it an effort and a sacrifice to part with it—we may also feel that we are making that effort and submitting to that sacrifice in the cause of the dead. Nor would there be the least difficulty in framing an Act which, with a truer consideration for the dead, should provide for such a mode of burying them as our reason and our interest require.

Nor, again, since it may be taken as an axiom that Nature will ever be found ready to supply us with the means of doing that which she requires us to do, need we ever be at a loss for ground in which to bury our dead. If it be true that a body, properly buried, is resolved in five, or, at most, six years, it follows that, at that interval or at intervals as much longer as we please, we may bury again and again in the same ground.

¹ Since this letter was written the Necropolis Earth to Earth Coffin has been invented and patented, and is admirably adapted to the purpose.

And now, Sir, with the soil at our feet asking us to reclaim and replenish her in this simple and obvious way, what are we to think of the wild project to drive into vapour the bodies of the 3,000 people who die weekly in Greater London alone, at a needless cost, an infinite waste, and (on such a scale) with an effect on the respirable air of the city that has yet to be estimated? I say advisedly "at an infinite waste," because it is incorrect to say that, in its ultimate reception of the products of Cremation, the earth acquires an augmentation of its concrete substance like that which it receives when a body is actually committed to it. If that were so we might as well intercept and burn up all the organic matter which has died, and which in the course of nature would find its way back to the earth. What really happens is this. When the body, consisting as it does of organic and of inorganic constituents in certain proportions, is placed within the earth, the organic matters are dissipated by gaseous resolution, by evaporation, and by the requirements of vegetation, while the inorganic remain to constitute a portion, however small, of new earth. Exposed to the more rapid desiccation of the furnace something like the same thing, indeed, may be said to result, since the fluids are driven off and the solids remain; but there is this essential difference in the two processes—a difference fatal to Cremation—viz., that while, by the earth, the solid residuum is disposed of, by the furnace it is left upon our hands; that while one process is final, the other is incomplete. What are we to do with this residuum, with this six, eight, or ten pounds of solid matter (about the average weight, by the way, of the Egyptian mummy) that the furnace is incapable of driving off? Are we to scatter it "broadcast over our fields," as recommended by a distinguished Cremationist? Apart from the fact that this is only another and a clumsy way of burying it, I doubt a general acquiescence in such a mode of disposing of it, and rather fear that the tendency may be to preserve

it, and that room must be found somewhere for the 3,000 urns and other vessels capable of receiving it. What are we to do with these urns? Are we to re-open our church vaults (happily closed, though still uncleansed) for their reception, or take them into our houses and move them with our furniture with every change of abode? How will our sons' sons, who have lost all interest in us, feel disposed to treat them? Will it not come to pass that, perplexed by such embarrassing possessions, they will one day want to get rid of them, and will there not then be some risk of their desecration? What if, after all—which is what would assuredly happen—they should be compelled to listen to the voice of Nature and driven to bury them?

If the positions sought to be established in this letter are true—if burial be the natural and necessary process I have asserted it to be—we may be sure that sooner or later, evade or misinterpret her as we may, Nature (whether in our columbaria or our cemeteries) will make herself heard at last, and—by the penalties she imposes upon us for our abuse of her gifts—compel us not only to bury our dead, but to bury them properly.

January 12, 1875.

LEADING ARTICLE FROM THE "TIMES," January 12, 1875.

THE interesting letter which we print this morning from Mr. Seymour Haden draws a terrible picture of the extent of an annoyance innocently inflicted.

It is bad enough, he says, that a dead body should be kept for several days above ground, but, even when it is at length got rid of, the mischief it is capable of occasioning is by no means yet at an end. The fault, however, is entirely with ourselves. We are not content to lay the corpse simply in the ground until, by a process of transmutation rather than of decay, its constituent elements have assigned themselves to fresh purposes.

We perversely inclose it in a strong coffin, and in other ways protect it from the wholesome influences of the soil in which it is laid, thus needlessly prolonging the inevitable course of dissolution, while we render it in every way more injurious and more horrible.

Our burial-places are thus sources of infection to the air and water in their neighbourhood, and the living are poisoned, with no benefit to the dead, but rather to insure results which we should all wish to avoid, both for ourselves and for our departed friends. The remedy is obvious, and there is nothing either in reason or sentiment that need prevent us from applying it. Not only should bodies be buried speedily, but we should be careful so to bury them as not to keep them from wholesome contact with the earth.

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If this were done, we should avoid the many pernicious consequences of our present unnatural and unscientific system. There are, in truth, so many objections to the chief alternative which has been proposed in the place of Mr. Seymour Haden's plan that we are heartily glad to learn on such excellent authority that the offending process¹ is not really necessary. Sentiment is so strong already that most of us will be delighted to find that reason is on the same side, and that the position which they thus unite to defend is safe from the attacks of Italian and German savants. Mr. Seymour Haden objects to cremation as a troublesome and wasteful way of doing what could be much better and more simply effected by a proper sort of burial. When all is done, too, cremation is only another form of burial in the end. The solids which would remain when the lighter portions of the body had been dissipated would have to be got rid of in some way or other. If they are preserved they will accumulate inconveniently on our hands, and will come, in the course of a generation or two, to be looked upon with no great reverence. They will thus scarcely be insured a resting-place above ground, and when they are buried, as after all they must be, the work will probably be done with even too little ceremony. How much better, he exclaims, to do at once what must be done sooner or later, and to spare ourselves the troublesome and expensive means by which the necessity will have been postponed.

We have, in fact, been fighting hitherto against nature, and with very imperfect weapons. The cremationists would improve upon our present species of warfare; but they, too, would be no less certainly beaten in the long run by the power against which they are matching themselves. We have only to yield wisely to the dictates of natural laws, and we shall find our account in a cheaper, a less troublesome, a less pernicious, and a more efficacious way

¹ Cremation.

of proceeding than we have been able to invent for ourselves.

Mr. Seymour Haden's proposals may be summed up in a few words. They amount simply to this—that by some decent contrivance or other we should allow the earth to come into actual contact with, and to exert its known chemical effects upon, the bodies which are still to be placed within it. The manner in which he advises us to effect this is as little liable to objection as possible. There is nothing needlessly revolting in the process of interment which he suggests. Custom is a great influence, and “earth to earth” are words with which we have been so long familiar that we do not shrink from what they describe as we do from the application of other agencies which science—and, as it would appear, mistaken science—has been vainly pressing upon us to adopt.

LEADING ARTICLE FROM THE
 "TIMES," February 2, 1875.

It is seldom that a question which concerns everybody, and which is beset with prejudices and interests, is so carefully, sensibly, and reverentially treated as that entitled *Earth to Earth* has been in these columns. Stepping on the tenderest of ground, and with thorns and briars, too, in the path of his argument, Mr. Seymour Haden, nevertheless, said all that was necessary, without laying himself open to one serious objection. Beyond the trifling remark that in order to express the destruction or purification of miasma he had employed a word which properly meant the arrest of decay, we cannot recall a single criticism worth notice on his long and able letter.

We wish we could be certain the appeal to our moral sense will be responded to as thoroughly as that to our scientific perceptions. Mr. Seymour Haden proved his case, and it now remains to be seen whether a world which professes to have attained the very acmè of enlightenment on all material questions is wise enough to be governed by the sound logic which itself appeals to. We certainly know a great deal more about this matter than our fathers did ; but thus far, instead of being the wiser, we are tenfold more the victims of sentimental weakness. The letters, however, that reach us, especially the appeal by Lord Essex to women," and the decisive response to it by "Vita," give us some hope that a topic necessarily distressing has not been brought up in vain. It should never be forgotten that everybody has a voice in this matter, and everybody a

right to dictate the future disposition of that which is now his only inalienable and most valuable property—his own body. Both custom and law give as much range of choice in this matter as is compatible with public decency. If any one of our readers to-day is buried, we will say a fortnight hence, with a pomp, a cost, and a durability of arrangement contrary to his own wishes, and perhaps beyond his means, it is his own fault. It is positively unfair to leave the business to survivors. In the absence of all instructions to the contrary, it is a fair presumption that what is actually done, however absurd it may be, has been distinctly and even pleasurably contemplated by the person now its unconscious object. We assert that it is in the power of every gentleman and lady in this country to take a sheet of note-paper, to write on it the few words forming the second paragraph in "Vita's" letter, and put it into an envelope superscribed with a direction that it be opened immediately after death. Of course it will be said that English feeling is all the other way, and that the revolution demanded cannot be effected in a day. We are rather inclined to think that an increasing evil, as our funeral customs certainly are, is likely to entail a violent reaction, which it would be well to anticipate. Every day there occur instances verging upon scandal in their folly and wickedness. A poor man dies after some years of failing health and strength, amid burdens and difficulties ever increasing. His mind has latterly been clouded ; the reins of discipline and of judgment have fallen from his hands ; his weaknesses have had more sway ; his long-standing debts have been accumulating, his household accounts are in arrear ; creditors great and small are waiting for his recovery or his death. By mere force of habit he fosters the old illusions founded on his hopes, or his wishes.

He dies. Immediately orders and invitations are sent out, for he must be buried as he lived.

In a day or two, with the aid of a lawyer, perhaps at his suggestion, a search is made ; desks, drawers, strong-boxes, writing-cases are opened, and the contents turned upside down. No will is found, or if found, an old one, disposing of properties long parted with, or mortgaged to their full value.

A call at the banker's elicits a melancholy and long-concealed tale. As for securities, stocks, shares, deeds, they are nowhere to be found, or, if found, are worthless. Possibly there is a bill of sale on the furniture of the house. There really is not sixpence to be got at or coming in—nothing but old debts struck off, or that should be. Of course there is a long doctor's bill to be paid ; rents, rates, and taxes too, perhaps. Such is the moment when, by sheer force of custom, a new debt of fifty pounds is incurred for a perfectly useless, and, under the circumstances, dishonest expenditure. We seem to have put an extreme case, but we can assure our readers it is not so extreme or so uncommon as they may suppose. In this case the illusion of a life goes on by a sort of momentum after death.

The ruling passions of the life have been ostentation, indulgence, unwillingness to look facts steadily in the face, and to live accordingly ; and as the man has lived, so he dies, and so he is buried. He is buried as if so important a person must indeed be a loss, not only to his family, but to the whole world ; and as if his body, the centre of so much social worship, had a right to be long protected from the laws of decay.

It is within the last half century that prodigious funerals, awful hearses drawn by preternatural quadrupeds, clouds of black plumes, solid and magnificent oak coffins instead of the sepulchral elm, coffin within coffin, lead, brick graves, and capacious catacombs have spread downwards far beyond the select circle once privileged to illustrate the vanity of human greatness.

If there must be dynasties living to be forgotten, and

therefore pyramids and obelisks, it was something that these necessary mementos should be few and exceptional. But latterly funeral pomp has exceeded itself, and while the world is living faster than ever it did, and fashion indulging in wilder caprices, death, in a kind of rivalry, joins the race of extravagances. Funerals are more oppressive, mourning more costly, and both really more revolting to the true instincts of real grief. Perhaps the most odious part of the affair is that the pressure is put not merely on poverty, but on poverty at its very weakest. The survivors are often wholly incapable of action—worn out, prostrated, overwhelmed.

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There is a certain pleasure in the reflection that earth has really come to earth, in obedience to the Divine command, and in faith in the Divine promise, nothing is so shocking as the too successful result of attempts to set that command at nought.

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The family vaults of old parish churches are, as anybody may know, the scene of more grotesque incidents, more sacrilegious robberies, more horrible profaneness, than any spots above ground, however open to the every-day world. Nuisances as they certainly are, they suffer a Nemesis in the dishonour and contempt they often bring on the poor remains they were designed to protect and honour. We feel, however, that the question is one of a larger character.

Our appeal must be to that great, wealthy, and ambitious middle class, which aims to be as good and as generous as the highest, but somewhat wiser and more ready to learn. It has shown itself susceptible of strong impulses and capable of great movements. Can it make up its mind to return in due time, at the appointed hour, to the earth it springs from, with cheerfulness, alacrity, and good will? Heroes have tried the edge of the fatal axe, and even kissed it; saints have embraced the cross or the stake; monks

and hermits have worn their own shrouds, slept in their coffins, or by the side of the open grave ; even wise men have had their *memento mori* over their heads, and potentates have had the warning daily whispered in their ears.

The emblems of mortality had a prominent place in the religious devotion of a former age, when even ladies of fashion used to retreat from the world for days or for a season, in order to go through the semblance of death and burial in one quaint form or another. There is no need of all this. It can be done much better, with much more sincerity, and much more edification.

If we could only make up our minds to quit this world when the call comes, rather more unrepiningly, putting a better face on the matter, and accepting our fate without the black looks of a rebel or of a slave, we should thereby impart more life and force to all the lessons of mortality preached in our ears. We are invited to hasten to our journey's end, and to see in death the gate of life. We are told a thousand cheerful things of our common goal, and we hold it a sin to doubt or despond as to that distant, further country. Then why are we to add continually new terrors to that Death which we believe not to be terrible at all ? Why are we to dress the road to Heaven as if it were indeed, and could only be, the descent into a Pagan Tartarus ?

LETTER THE SECOND.

IN my letter of the 12th January, prompted mainly by such considerations as might be expected to occur to a person of my profession, and such as I have since found had occurred to others,¹ I ventured to propound a principle and affirm a fact: the principle, that, in the order and economy of Nature, it is the office of the earth to remove from our sight and turn to our advantage every form of organic decay accruing to its surface—decay that would otherwise overwhelm us; the fact, that we virtually, though no doubt quite innocently, ignore that principle when we fail to avail ourselves of the signal benefits which its application confers upon us, and when we seek to exempt from the friendly operation of the earth the decaying bodies of our dead. Pleading for the dead, and for their right to participate in these benefits—a right of which, without due consideration, as it seems to me, we deprive them—I contrasted the offensive putrefaction of imperfectly buried animal matter with its comparatively benign disintegration when properly “committed to the ground,” and—finding a warrant for what I wrote in the well-known faculty of the earth to charge the organic into the inorganic, the noxious into the innocuous—claimed for the *ἡρεμακαῦσις* which attends proper burial that it might rather be regarded as a process of transformation than a form of decay. Continuing, too, the argument in the

¹ *The Reliquary*, July, 1864; *The Medical Times and Gazette*, July—August, 1873, &c.

spirit of an absolute belief in the sufficiency and perfection of all natural processes and in the danger that must attend any systematic attempt to contravene them, I pointed out that, by our contrivances for preventing the necessary and salutary action of the earth upon the bodies of the dead, we had brought upon ourselves a penalty the onerous nature of which we are already abundantly sensible of, but which in time would certainly, as far as this and other populous cities are concerned, acquire the proportions and consequences of a plague.

In the letter which I address to you to-day I propose, with your permission, to reduce these general reflections and statements to a practical shape ; to show how the thing that is manifestly wrong may be avoided, and the thing that is right done ; and, finding occasion as I go on to consider with the attention and respect to which they are fully entitled the fears and objections of others, to do what I can to remove those fears and objections. I hope to be able to effect this :—

1. By such a further insistence on the competency and power of the earth as may satisfy those who still suppose that natural burial within it must poison both it and the springs which have their rise in it.

2. By such a consideration of the signs of death and of our means of observing and verifying them as may reassure those who fear the effect of any change in our present practice of deferred interment.

3. By such an exposure of the abuses attending the management of our present cemeteries, and such observations on the defective state of the law in respect to the safe and proper burial of the dead as may engage the action of Parliament, and, I trust, bring about their amendment.

1. It has been well observed that since the excreta of animals during life and their bodies after death must all pass through a process of change, and in new forms re-enter the atmosphere, some provision must exist in the

world by which such a vast mass of corruption as they represent may do so innocuously.¹ That provision, I have said, exists in the earth. Two distinct forms of decay do, in fact, occur in Nature—putrefaction, which is a change set up between the particles of unburied matter by the air and by water (both more or less impure) to which it is exposed, and by minute organisms which float in the air and which obtain direct access to it ; and *erimacausis*, which is the scientific name for the effect brought about by the indirect access to the buried body through porous soils of the same air and the same water, but winnowed of their putrescent elements by filtration, and chymically transformed by the force which is known as surface affinity—the first of these forms giving rise to compounds offensive to the senses and pernicious to the health, the last to carbonic acid, water, and ammonia, the food of plants, and, through the agency of those plants, the ultimate purifiers of the air. Our aim should, therefore, be, by the burial of the body, to imitate this *erimacausis*—to promote and not to oppose it ; and the more since it can be easily shown, by a comparison of the waste of matter in the excretions with the known volume of the soft parts of the living body, that transformation proceeds so rapidly that the whole of those soft parts are dissipated and renewed, not every seven years, as is traditionally supposed, but every six weeks ; so that that which is our body to-day, and which we are so sedulous to preserve, was not our body six weeks ago, and would not be our body six weeks hence. To desire to preserve such a body at all, I have ventured to call an unreasoning sentiment ; to preserve it for an indefinite time in a poisonous and putrescent state may, I think, be stigmatised, without extravagance or impropriety, as an offence against society.

Nor, contrary to popular belief, does the decaying body itself, when buried in a sufficient quantity of earth to

¹ Lyon Playfair—*Address on Health*. Glasgow, 1874.

resolve it, impart any impurity whatever to the adjacent soil or to the other elements around it, a fact which any one may ascertain for himself by digging down upon the body of an animal which has been buried, it matters not how long or how short a time, and finding (as he will do if he proceed cautiously) that the soil in contact with it has only been affected by it to about the eighth of an inch, and that, until this very last film of enveloping earth has been reached and removed, no smell whatever has been emitted from the excavation he is making.

2. It has been observed with some surprise that, in my former letter, I said nothing of the possibility of mistaking the signs of death, and that I offered no guarantee that, in the event of a radical change in our practice, such a mistake should not arise. I had not, in truth, thought any such notice necessary. "I saw in a moment he was dead," is the natural and spontaneous exclamation of even an inexperienced person who finds himself suddenly, and for the first time, in the presence of an unexpected death. No necessity to make a prolonged scrutiny to be sure of the fact. Dressed as he is and sitting in his chair, with all the appliances of life and of recent occupation about him, there is yet that in the appearance of the man before him which tells the new-comer at once that he is dead ; and he, terrified by what he sees, runs without delay to inform others of his discovery. True, there are persons in the world capable of going into that room and of coming out again, and even of occupying themselves about the dead man without perceiving anything unusual, and without a notion that for the last ten minutes they have been in the presence of death. But then there are also those who never look at the sky—who know that there is a sky, and, generally, that it is grey or blue, bright or sombre, but who may be said never to observe it. Such as these might, indeed, see death without recognising it ; but for these it is useless to write. And if, when death has come upon us unawares, it

may be thus easily recognised, by how much the more may we be sure of its presence when its coming has been long looked for ! Who that has watched the progress towards death—the wasting illness, the successive phenomena of the sinking process, the obliteration of function after function, the gradual obscuration of sense, and, happily, of sensibility (for death is never painful), the “approach of death,” as it is called, and yet has doubted it when it came—mistaken the absolute and final character of the silence that succeeds it—of the still more characteristic rigidity that so rapidly follows it ?

Still, even in the most obvious cases, the presence of death should always be certified, not only by those who have watched and can testify to its apparent occurrence, but by those who are competent to pronounce with certainty upon the fact.

Apart, however, from purposes of mere utility or propriety, it is but kind and reasonable to treat with the utmost consideration the doubts of those the disorder of whose moral, rather than of whose physical perceptions, renders them at such a moment unable or unwilling to persuade themselves of a truth which is only too apparent to every one else, and who naturally desire some sign by which they may be sure that the existence they have hung upon has ceased for ever. Is there any such sign, any such certainty ? Undoubtedly there is. As long as life lasts, as long as a spark of vitality remains, two great functions—which cannot, even for a few minutes, be in abeyance—must be going on—the functions of *circulation* and of *respiration*. With our present means of investigation is it possible that one or other of these functions should be in operation and we not know it, or so suppressed as to baffle our recognition ? Whatever may have been the case with the imperfect appliances and information of a past age, such ignorance of the phenomena essential to vitality is impossible now. If this were the place in which I could

usefully discuss in detail a matter which, in the event of a doubt arising, would necessarily be referred to medical experience, I would discuss it. If any good could come of a popular description of that science of *auscultation* which we now employ with so much effect every day, but which was unknown when the horrifying events of which we read are said to have occurred, and when "the apparent absence of sensation and motion"¹ were the accepted signs of death—I would describe it. If I might hope to render intelligible to those who have not made physiology their study the use of the *stethoscope*, and the action of the *sphygmograph*, and of those recent instruments of Marey which count, measure, and register the movements of respiration and of the circulation as surely and accurately as the anemometer measures and records the force and velocity of the wind—I would attempt it. Plainly, however, any such attempt would be as out of place as it would be useless. Far better than any assurances of mine must be the important declaration which, by the consideration of six of our most distinguished living physicians and surgeons, I am permitted to append to this letter. I invite the most timid reader to weigh well and consider every word of that declaration, and to ask himself if the eminent and honourable men who have placed their names at the foot of it would have done so if the least shadow of a doubt of what they were attesting had rested on their minds.

But, it may be said, since we may not always be within reach of medical aid, can you give us no single and simple sign by which we ourselves may judge of the fact of death? Certainly. Most of us know that, under the ordinary conditions of diffused heat, inanimate objects, whatever their substance or nature, acquire what is called an *equilibrium of temperature*, while animate objects have and maintain a temperature of their own—i.e., that every piece of furniture in a given room in which there is no fire and

¹ *On the Disorder of Death.* W. Whiter, 1819.

which derives its heat from the general warmth of the air, acquires the temperature of the air of that room ; that a thermometer suspended from the ceiling, or placed on the mantelpiece, the table, the chair, or the bed, would register the same number of degrees of heat. Well, then, this being so, suppose a human body in that room and on that bed which for twenty-four hours has presented the usual characteristics of death, but in respect of which it is desired to make assurance doubly sure, can it be done ? Certainly it can. If that body be alive it will *not* be subject to the law just described, but will have a temperature of its own—higher or lower, it may be, than that of the furniture about it, but still a temperature of its own. If dead, it will be subject to the physical laws which govern the inert and inanimate objects around it—the bed on which it lies and the table which is beside it—and a thermometer placed on one or the other will be found to stand, and to remain at, the same point.

May 19, 1875.

DECLARATION REFERRED TO AT p. 25.

“The following question, arising out of an apprehension admitted to exist, lest a curtailment of the interval now allowed between death and burial might lead to the accident of interment before life were extinct, has been proposed to us by Mr. Seymour Haden :—

“‘As hospital physicians and surgeons of extended experience, has it ever occurred to you to see a case of so-called suspended animation or trance which, in your opinion, could be mistaken for death ; and do you think, the present state of our knowledge and resources considered, that the occurrence of such a case, or of such a mistake, can be regarded as possible ?’

"In reply to this question we desire to say that no case of the kind it suggests ever presented itself to any of us, and to express our confident belief that the dread of the possible occurrence of such a case is without support in the medical experience of this country ; and, further, that the signs of death are as certain after a few hours' suspension of the vital functions as they can be after many days.

"It would, we feel, be a matter of regret, and an indication of a low state of public intelligence if the groundless fears to which our attention has been directed by Mr. Seymour Haden should hinder, for a moment, the adoption of an improvement in our social system, the importance of which cannot be overrated.

"GEORGE BURROWS, M.D., *President of
the Royal College of Physicians.*

"WM. FERGUSSON.

"WILLIAM W. GULL, M.D.

"WILLIAM JENNER.

"JAMES PAGET.

"THOMAS WATSON, M.D.

"LONDON, *March 13, 1875.*"

LETTER THE THIRD.

TO-DAY, in continuation of my letter of May 19th, I have to speak of the Metropolitan cemetery, and, from the point of view of its pretensions to fulfil the hygienic purposes for which it was established, to consider it in reference to the evils which arise either, directly, out of its defective constitution and management, or, indirectly, out of its connexions and trade interests, which are not the interests of the public. The chief of these evils are :—

(a) The prevention of the resolution of the body by the use of the closed coffin, vault, and catacomb.

(b) The saturation and pollution of the soil by the piling together of a number of coffins in the same grave.

(c) The unfitness of the present suburban cemetery for all the essential purposes of sepulture arising out of an improper selection of its geological site,¹ and its dangerous proximity to the town ; and

(d) The influence in its councils, in a sense adverse to the interests of the public, of its chief proprietor, and virtual director, the undertaker.

(a) Since the coffin is the *fons et origo mali*, the tangible and material agent in the production of all the evils which it is the object of these letters to remedy, the necessary

¹ “With the exception of the Necropolis, at Woking, none of the cemeteries have been selected with any attention to the nature of the soil.”—PROF. BERNAYS.

considerations attaching to it should have precedence of other matter, and we should try to ascertain at starting whether its first use was suggested by fashion or dictated by necessity. That, at all times, it was looked upon as a questionable contrivance may be inferred from the occasional requests of sensible persons to be buried without it, and from the earliest records of our cathedrals and parish churches which provide for the payment of larger fees for those buried in coffins than for those buried without—for “chested than for unchested buryalls”—but chiefly from the elaborate judgments which, from time to time, have been delivered in condemnation of its use and of the indefinite tenure of the soil which that use implies. Lord Stowell says¹ :—

“It has been argued that the ground once given to the body is appropriated to it for ever; that it is literally in mortmain unalienably; that it is not only the *domus ultima*, but the *domus æterna* of that tenant, who is never to be disturbed, be his condition what it may. The introduction of another body into that lodgment at any time, however distant, is an unwarrantable intrusion. . . . In support of these positions it seems to be assumed that the tenant himself is imperishable; for, surely there can be no inextinguishable title, no perpetuity of possession, belonging to a subject which itself is perishable. But the fact is that ‘man’ and ‘for ever’ are terms quite incompatible in any state of existence, dead or living, in this world. The time must come when *ipse periere ruinae*, when the posthumous remains must mingle with and compose a part of that soil in which they have been deposited. . . . The *domus æterna* is a mere flourish of rhetoric; the process of nature will speedily resolve them into an intimate mixture with their kindred dust; and their dust will help to furnish a place of repose for other occupants in succession. The common cemetery is not *res unius ætatis*, the property of one generation now departed, but is likewise the common property of the

¹ “Gilbert v. Buzzard.” Haggard’s *Reports*.

living, and of generations yet unborn. . . . Any contrivance, therefore, which prolongs the time of dissolution beyond the period at which the common local understanding and usage have fixed it, is an act of injustice, since by such contrivances it is, in course of time, given to a comparatively small number of dead to shoulder out the living and their posterity. . . . Coffins are not recognised by any authority whatever; mention of them is nowhere made, but rather studiously avoided in the Burial Service of the Church of England, and, generally, their use can only be regarded as an encroachment on the rights of the living."

Coffins, it is not disputed, have been in use for all time. Joseph "died and is chested," in Egypt; but a hundred and eighty years ago, coffins, though in use, were not in common use in England, the plainer sort of us being content before that time to be carried to our graves in open chests or coffers which were kept at the parish church for the occasion, and only employed to convey the body from the house of death to that other house which "hath been appointed for all living," after which they were returned to their accustomed place of deposit, which was usually a niche in the church wall. Arrived at the grave ("when they come to the grave, while the corpse is made ready to be laid *into* the earth") the body, properly enveloped—at one time in coarse linen kept together by bone pins, and later in woollen—was removed from its temporary case and buried; the old ritualist, Wheatley, making this removal from its coffin and its "just a-going to be put into the ground" ("we therefore commit his body to the ground") the occasion for a homily on the shortness and misery of temporal life and on our entire dependence at the last on the help and mercy of God.¹ This open burial, again, permitted a registration of the fact by the vicar that it had been "made in woollen" according to the Act. Still earlier a couple of planks, separated at the head and foot

¹ *The Reliquary*, No. 17, 1864.

by a turf, were used for the same purpose of carriage, and these, since they in no way retarded the resolution of the body, were often buried with it.¹ When and why did these poor planks assume the form and every-day use of the present coffin? I have searched in vain for an answer, reasonable or unreasonable, to this question. In the time of the Plague? To avert infection? Happily, no; for in that emergency no time was given for the perfection of a contrivance which might at any time have subjected us to a renewal of its outbreak. When, then? Apparently, when the pretension which attends the acquisition of wealth without intelligence suggested its use; when it was desired to keep the body for days for the purpose of giving it an ostentatious funeral; when the prosperous hosier or vintner aspired to the fashions and follies of his betters; when time was needed, not to honour the dead, but to open the pestilent vault and prepare the "obsequious" mourning; when, in the jargon of the undertaker, in short (the covert irony of which it was not given to him to understand), funerals came to be "performed" in this country, and when a week was wanted to arrange the pageant which was to set out with the blazon of a mock heraldry, and to return with a dozen of the performers dangling their legs from the but-now-vacated hearse.

One thing in reference to coffins yet remains to be said; and that is, that any form of solid wood is unfit for their construction. Wood, in moist earth, is nearly indestructible. The modest planks of our forefathers are found as they were buried centuries ago,² and wooden coffins of Charles II.'s time were removed from the Holborn cemetery in nearly as sound a state as those of recent burial. Stems of the old Scotch fir, too, which have been dead a thousand years, may be seen in any number on the moist lands of Sutherlandshire, the section of which presents all the

¹ *Antiquities of Myddle*. Gough. 1700.

² Southwell Church, Nottingham. J. Place.

appearance and has all the odour of recent wood. The reason of this is well known. Substances most prone to decomposition are substances which contain nitrogen; nitrogen hates combination and is always trying to get out. Ligneous fibre contains little or no nitrogen; therefore, ligneous fibre, even under conditions usually favourable to decomposition, is nearly indestructible. I lay stress on this, because it is not uncommonly supposed that wooden coffins are readily perishable, and, therefore, unobjectionable for the purposes of proper burial.

(b) Considering that our reason for discontinuing intramural interment was that the soil of the old city graveyards had become so saturated and super-saturated with animal matter that it could no longer properly be called soil, it might be supposed that, in establishing the new cemeteries, stringent provision would have been made that such a pollution of the ground should not again occur; the more so that it must have been foreseen that, by the inevitable extension of the town, the then suburban would become again the intramural cemetery, and that the horrors of the old graveyard would, thus, come to be repeated and multiplied. Not only was no such provision made, but one of the chief of the new companies gave prompt proof of its unfitness to comprehend and to use the powers intrusted to it by making the extraordinary proposal to bury 1,335,000 bodies in seven acres of ground. Here, Sir, since it may not else be believed, is this amazing proposal:—"It has been found," say the newly-installed directors of the General Cemetery Company (Kensal Green) in recommendation of the plans which they are proposing for their future guidance—"it has been found that seven acres will contain 133,500 graves; each grave will contain ten coffins; thus accommodation will be found for 1,335,000 deceased paupers."¹ The very *naïveté* of this proposal might, one would think,

¹ *Report*, p. 8.

have at once opened the eyes and excited the alarm of those who were conferring on these companies almost unlimited powers, and have prepared them for the abuse of those powers which speedily followed. No such alarm, however, appears to have been excited, and a system of interment, founded, we must suppose, on this surprising calculation, was at once inaugurated and permitted. If in the old graveyards, the Vestries and Guardians of the poor saved themselves expense by piling coffin upon coffin till the hole which they had dug would contain no more, the new Cemetery Companies increased their dividends and propitiated their shareholders by doing precisely the same thing. Here and there, indeed, by a sort of ingenious fiction, we find a few feet of ground sold in "perpetuity" to some one who, being dead and without heirs, has left no one to look after his property; but in all material respects the new *régime* differed in nothing from the old—the same prevention of resolution by the use of the closed coffin, the same pestiferous accumulation of unresolvable animal matter, and with it, of course, the same fevers to which they have given, and will yet, for many a day, give rise; coffins air-tight only for as long as the nails in them remain unruined, and the lead which lines them resists the pressure of the dreadful gases within—thrust, as of old, into brick graves, to become sooner or later filled with water, and huddled into cellars called catacombs, unceasing exhalants of every form of enteric disease—while the earth, the element capable of disposing of all this, and yet of retaining its own purity, by a refinement of ingenuity which can only be designated perverse, is prevented from exercising its function and condemned to become as putrid as the horrors it hides. Sir, if instead of writing to you, as I am doing, to urge a sane and simple compliance with a bountiful provision of Nature, I were writing to you to propose what we are now doing every day, and

what the administrators of these cemeteries are persisting in doing against all remonstrance—namely, that we should collect together all the decaying residuum of this great city into boxes, and pile these boxes one above another in our open spaces and breathing places till these were filled with them, and then that we should do the same thing in great lines of circumvallation about the town till they, too, had to be enlarged by its extension, surely you would be warranted in treating me as a dangerous lunatic !

(c) Ignorant, then, as we have seen him to be of the nature of, and of the hygienic necessity for, the resolution of the body after it has been buried in the earth, it is, perhaps, not surprising that the Cemetery Director should choose a site for his speculation in a soil incapable of effecting that resolution, and that we should find him establishing his cemetery in the basin of the London clay, and in dangerous proximity to the town. But it is surprising that the Government, which refused to listen to the recommendations of the Board of Health in this matter, should have preferred to intrust the sanitary interests of a great city, and so important a duty as the burial of its dead, to a class of men who, however respectable, had shown themselves to be lamentably ignorant of the very first principles which should govern them in the management of such things.

(d) Again, one of the principal shareholders of these companies and most active attendants at their meetings is the undertaker, on whose patronage they mainly depend for their business, and who, under the threat of withdrawing his custom, may at any time virtually control their decisions. Now, we know what the undertaker is, and how little his interests are our interests. Nothing can be more sympathetic and decorous than his reception of us. He enters into our feelings as if they were his own, views

things as we view them, deprecates what we deprecate, and—though he may insist upon the duty of doing the particular thing that we are about “handsomely”—cordially agrees with us on the impropriety of a needless expense and display; so that when we have settled with him the cemetery to which we are to go (which is, of course, the cemetery with which he is connected), we take our leave, satisfied that we have fallen into good hands. It is to this man and to his influence with the cemetery companies that we owe the maintenance of half the abuses of that part of the subject over which he more immediately presides. It was, for instance, unless I am much mistaken, not the Directors (properly speaking) of the Kensal Green Company who, only the other day, frustrated the intentions of Mr. Horsley when, in his preparation for the burial of a near relative, he “desired to obey in spirit and in letter the divine injunction to give earth to earth”—but the undertaker, who saw that it would never do to permit so dangerous an innovation as was contemplated. But, dismissing the undertaker (who, by the way, ought to be licensed), there is a part of this case which I will ask the chairman of the Kensal Green Company publicly to explain. In his letter to Mr. Horsley he informs him that the company are bound, by their Act, to refuse his request. On an examination of the Act, it would appear to contain no such disabling clause. Acts incorporating other cemeteries contain no such clause. Will he be good enough to point this one out to us? This is important—because the impression left by the chairman’s letter on the public mind is that we are burying our dead improperly by Act of Parliament.

To insist at any length, after what has been said, on the necessity which exists for immediately closing the present cemeteries would be mere reiteration. That they are full and more than full, that they will soon be as much a part of the town as the old graveyards, and that they have been

formed in a soil incapable of resolving animal matter, are, in the aggregate, reasons more than sufficient to justify their immediate suppression. If it be urged that a portion of their ground remains unoccupied, and therefore that they are not "full," it may be answered that that portion which is occupied is so much too full that to add anything to such a mass of unresolved matter would be an unpardonable sanitary error. If it be pleaded that by the Acts of their incorporation they are forbidden to approach within a certain distance of habitable dwellings, and therefore that there is no need for their removal, it may be answered that there is nothing in those Acts which forbids the approach of those dwellings towards them. If it be advanced that a portion of the land in three out of eight of them is not exactly clay, it may be answered that all the other disabling conditions which affect these three affect them in such force as to warrant their condemnation, without any consideration of that palliative circumstance. In fine, on sanitary and every other public ground, their maintenance as burial-places is no longer admissible. And surely, if the Burial of the Dead may not unreasonably be compared in importance with the main drainage, is it not at least as fit—would it not be much fitter—that so serious a trust should be undertaken either by the Board of Works, or by a special department under its immediate supervision?

As to the acreage required for the purpose of burying the whole mortality of London on the principle of giving a separate grave to each body, and of allowing it an undisturbed tenure of that grave for ten years—that is to say, for a longer time than would be necessary for its dissolution—a thousand acres would bury 100,000 bodies a year for ever; therefore, allowing for the increase of population to be expected with lapse of time, and adopting, say, 200,000 as a probable mean of the prospective annual mortality of Greater London, a total of 2,000 acres of

cemetery space, once obtained, would, *without entailing upon us any further outlay at any future time, bury the whole of this mortality for ever.* A thousand acres of that space already exist at Woking, so that the operation I am supposing contemplates the purchase of the present suburban cemeteries (500 acres), and the acquisition of 1,000 acres in the region I have indicated. In negotiating with the present cemeteries, account would, of course, be taken of the sales they have already effected "in perpetuity," and of the very little land, available for any useful purposes whatever, that they have yet to sell. Meanwhile we have, as I have said, at Woking a thousand acres of excellent land for all the purposes of a cemetery, and capable, *upon the primary condition I insist upon of insuring the resolution of the body,* of effecting 100,000 interments per annum for ever, the Act of Incorporation of that cemetery providing also a separate grave for each body, and containing no disabling clause against the practice of interments upon the principles I am advocating. The Woking Cemetery is also the only existing cemetery in which the burial of a body can be effected with the present certainty that it will not be disturbed for ten years. In the absence, therefore, of any ameliorations whatever of our present cemeterial system being obtainable, it is plainly to the interest of every class, high and low, to avoid the seething suburban cemeteries, and to bury their dead at Woking.

And now, Sir, as I turn over the last page with which I shall have to trouble you, I would gladly know how far I have succeeded in conveying to others my own sense of the gravity of the situation we have created ; whether the reader will have been able to realise, from what I have said, the certain effect on the life and health of this and of future generations of the mass of festering corruption which we have been laying up and cannot now get rid of —unless, indeed, we deal with it as we did in Holborn ;

whether he is conscious that for a time to come, at least equal to that during which we have been creating this evil, the soil which we have been so industriously sowing with disease and death must continue to yield its annual harvest ; whether he will remember that as long as these horrible coffins hold together, the plague to which we have given existence cannot be stayed, and that we must wait their disintegration and the resolution of their contents before we can hope for the life-prolonging effect of a pure soil, pure water, and a pure atmosphere.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

F. SEYMOUR HADEN.

June 16, 1875.

LEADING ARTICLE FROM THE
 "TIMES," June 17, 1875.

WE publish to-day a concluding letter from Mr. Seymour Haden on those proposals for the reform of the prevailing method of interment which have aroused so general and so strong an interest.

Mr. Haden is so far fortunate in the time he has chosen for his appeal that the system of burial handed down to us by our immediate ancestors has ceased to be in harmony with the requirements of the present generation. Without following Mr. Haden into an antiquarian dissertation, it seems manifest that a solid coffin would naturally suggest itself as the only means of keeping a dead body for several days in a dwelling-house without intolerable offence ; and even a century ago, when postal communication was tardy, and personal travelling was often more tardy still, a week or more would necessarily elapse before all who were bidden to a funeral could by any means be brought together. In those days delayed interment, if not actually a necessity, was, at all events, essential to the fulfilment of cherished customs, and without substantial coffins delayed interment would have been impossible. The time of waiting, which was then compulsory, and which was spent in a darkened house and in abstinence from worldly business, lent itself naturally to the art of the undertaker, and to the foolish ceremonies which were supposed to betoken respect for the departed. The Telegraph and the Railway have enabled us to compress into hours the work for which days were formerly necessary ; and, at the same

time, the progress of sanitary science has taught us to regard delayed interment as an unmixed evil.

The very irksomeness of the accustomed seclusion has led to its being abbreviated, to the great relief and benefit of all concerned, as soon as abbreviation became possible, and modern facilities for locomotion have rendered it usual to bury with what would once have been thought unseemly precipitation. The minds of the living, less distracted than formerly from the considerations which common sense would dictate, have become better able to estimate at their true value the so-called "poms" and ceremonies with which the "performance" of funerals was once surrounded, and which were only submitted to under the influence of feelings morbidly excited by brooding over the relics of mortality. The persons who left strict injunctions for simplicity of interment, and even those who, like Charles Dickens, denounced the paraphernalia of the undertaker as "revolting absurdities," found both sympathy and imitators ; and during the last ten or twenty years, a feeling of hostility to funeral display has been steadily gaining ground.

Notwithstanding the change in the value of money, and the general increase of luxury and display in other directions, an ordinary funeral is now far less expensive than it was even twenty years ago ; and the public are quite prepared to listen to those who say that the change really required is a radical one, which should not stop at the mere curtailment of foolish formalities, but should aim at remodelling the whole procedure by the light of modern science and of accumulated experience.

Under these circumstances Mr. Haden comes forward to tell us that the central evil of our system of interment is the solid coffin, which interposes an obstacle to those beneficent operations of nature by which our bodies would be speedily resolved into the earth from which they sprang. We are all his debtors for the consideration which has

induced him to rest his argument mainly upon the known chymical properties of the soil, and to adorn it with pleasant imagery and with solacing suggestions, when he might so easily have illustrated the effects of coffin interment by a recital of the horrors which led to the abandonment of intramural graveyards.

He might, in effect, have appealed in favour of the system which he advocates to the practice of many Eastern countries. In Turkey, for example, where the only coffin used is a light case of thin boards, the intervals between which are at least as wide as the boards themselves, all that Mr. Haden urges in support of his system is fully realised, and the thin partition of earth which separates the living from the dead is yet an impassable barrier to the offensiveness of inevitable decay.

His case, therefore, does not rest upon mere theory, but upon the solid basis of the experience of centuries ; and it is no less certain that the earth would accomplish all that he claims on its behalf than that the simple ceremonial which he advocates would deprive mortality of half its terrors for those who are left behind. But it must not be supposed, however much Mr. Haden's letters may commend themselves to the discerning, that he has as yet made much progress towards the practical adoption of his suggestions. He points out to-day that the business of interment is carried on through almost innumerable agencies, or, in other words, that the pecuniary interests of large numbers of respectable people are identified with the maintenance of the present system. The evils of this system are so obvious that it will have no defenders ; for those who will be most anxious for its preservation will certainly be too shrewd to come forward in its support.

Judgment will not only be given almost universally against the undertaker and his satellites, but will be given by default ; and the weak point of the case will be the

want of any authority by which the judgment thus given can be enforced. When death comes to a household the survivors are weakened, in most cases, by a period of anxiety, of broken rest, and of sorrow, and they are in no mood to take the initiative in casting off the chains of custom. It is so easy to send for the neighbouring undertaker, and to bid him "do what is necessary." In many cases, too, the existing cemeteries will continue to attract by reason of the real or supposed wish of the deceased to be buried in the vicinity of some loved one who has gone before.

* * * * *

Mr. Haden tells us that an existing cemetery, by its geological formation, is well fitted to promote the resolution of our bodies into their component elements, and that the experiment which he recommends might be tried there without delay.¹ Why should not a Co-operative Society be formed for carrying his plan into effect? A small entrance-fee from each member would defray all the initiatory expenses, and membership would be an expression, while living, of a desire for the kind of burial which the Society would undertake to effect.

By such an arrangement as this all difficulty would be taken away from the survivors, who would feel that they were complying with the wishes of the deceased, and who would have at their command an agency which would supply the place of the undertaker. The success of the experiment—and its success would not be doubtful—would soon lead to the general adoption of the change, and the Society would be superseded when its functions were discharged.

¹ The London "Necropolis."



By the kind permission of the Author, such portions of the foregoing letters as refer to the natural system of interment he advocates (and which is now being carried out at the London Necropolis, Brookwood, Woking, Surrey), are here reprinted.

Earth to Earth Society,

OFFICES :

2, LANCASTER PLACE, STRAND, W.C.





